

Members of the Appleby Archaeology Group were delighted to welcome Professor Colin Haselgrave from Leicester University recently when he gave the final talk in their winter 2017-18 season. His subject was the huge Iron Age stronghold at Stanwick, near Scotch Corner, upon which site Colin had both supervised excavations and carried out research, enabling him to become one of the foremost Iron Age researchers in Britain.

Colin began by sketching a brief history of the physical size and excavation at the site. Stanwick camp covers an area of about 3 square Km and is the 5th or 6th largest Iron Age fort in Europe. The rampart probably originally consisted of 155,000 cubic metres of clay and stone and could have taken up to 4 million hours to construct. Between 2 and 300 ordinary farms were enclosed by the outer perimeter, which measures some 10Km in length. First excavated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1951-52, the site had produced some spectacular finds, including a remarkable sword, still in its scabbard, found in a waterlogged area in the north-west entrance. There were some small excavations later in the 1950s but it was not until the 1980s, when North Yorkshire County Council requested excavations be carried out that Colin, then at Durham University, became involved. These excavations were limited to an area called The Tofts, where a painstaking geophysical survey showed traces of rig & furrow and a number of enclosures. This had been suspected to be the first proper fortification on the site, surrounded as it was by massive ramparts

Colin explained that the chronology of the finds at Stanwick suggest that there were 3 main structural periods. The first lasted from around 75BC to approximately 25BC. This appeared to be a period of rapid structural change, with the formation of a large midden, although with evidence of only intermittent occupation.

The middle period ran from 25BC to about 35AD, during which a ceremonial enclosure was constructed along with a number of large timber buildings. It is likely that an earth and stone rampart, which was also constructed at that time, sported a palisade fence, in the manner of the similar site at Sutton, near Doncaster. There might also have been a small permanent occupation. Finds dated to this context included pottery from France, Roman coinage and metalwork and flagons and amphorae, all very rare in northern England and suggesting strong links with the Mediterranean. Local brass working was taking place, including the manufacture of Roman style artefacts and regional trading was evidenced by finds of pottery querns and salt briquetage.

The final phase of occupation at Stanwick, from 35AD to around 70AD showed much of the timber building being replaced in stone and an expansion of continental contact, finds including Gaulish Samian ware, exotic foodstuffs such as fish sauce, olives and wine. Part of an Obsidian cup from Italy was found, as well as pieces of Italian glass. It was thought that it had been during this time that the extensive area now occupied by the fort was enclosed and embanked.

Colin next addressed Stanwick in its regional context. He said that firstly there were obvious connections with the multiple sites at Scotch Corner where there had been intensive activity in the Roman era between 70 & 80AD. Finds there had included Samian ware, gaming counters, pellet moulds, a denarius dating from 152BC and a Roman glass jug with a representation of Bacchus. Secondly, the earlier earthwork known as the Scots Dike connected the rampart at Stanwick to the River Swale near Richmond, although this had appeared to have fallen into disuse by the time of the initial building at Stanwick. Finally, a major hoard of Iron Age metalwork had been discovered at Melsonby, just outside the Stanwick perimeter, in 1843 and is now held in the British Museum.

Colin ended his talk by discussing the likely purpose of the site. He said that in all likelihood Stanwick had been the royal estate of Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes tribe, intended to impress by its size, rather than as a fortification. It had simply been too large to defend. The Roman historian Tacitus had famously related the story of Cartimandua's alliances with the Romans, her treachery against the British King Caractacus and her feud with her ex-consort Venutius and broadly, the evidence provided by archaeology supported the story. Colin also mused on the possible remains still hidden under the earth at this extensive site.

After taking questions from the appreciative audience, Professor Haselgrove was warmly thanked for his fascinating insights into this historical period, little known in the north of England.

The new season of talks in Appleby begins in October with a talk by Dr Fiona Edmunds on the links between Appleby and the Kingdom of Northumbria.